



# The 3 R's for Bullying Prevention: Recognize, Respond and Report

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*"All my life I have been bullied."*

Luke Jackson, *Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome*

**B**ullying in the United States was once a silent epidemic endured by millions of children on a daily basis. The attitude "kids will be kids" was just part of normal childhood development. Many parents and professionals did not recognize the implications of bullying, the long term impact on childhood victims, and the overall negative impact on the school environment. Today, bullying in schools is being recognized as a national problem for all students including children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Fortunately for students like Luke Jackson, the U.S. Department of Education views bullying as a national public safety issue and has increased its efforts in addressing it in schools. For

parents and school personnel to create a safe educational environment and follow the legal requirements set out by the federal government, they must recognize, respond and report bullying in schools.

## Recognize

Recognizing the startling national statistics on bullying in schools is the first step in an anti-bullying program. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that 32% of all middle school and high school students are bullied in school. In addition, it has been reported that 60% of children with disabilities are bullied in schools (Ability Path, 2011). A study of students with physical disabilities demonstrated that they were more likely to be called names and excluded from activities (Olweus, 1993). A report from the Massachusetts Advocates for Children (Ability Path, 2011) surveyed

400 parents of children with ASD and found that nearly 88% of parents reported their child had been bullied in school. According to Dr. Kowalski, a professor at Clemson University, "Because of difficulty with social interactions and the inability to read social cues, children with autism and Asperger's Syndrome have higher rates of peer rejection and higher frequencies of verbal and physical attacks." (Ability Path, 2011) These startling statistics of reported bullying in schools support the need for a comprehensive anti-bullying program for individuals with disabilities including students with ASD.

In addition to recognizing the prevalence of bullying in schools, parents and school professionals must recognize the complexities and various forms of bullying. Bullying is not only direct contact or physical assault but can

take milder more indirect forms such as repeated mild teasing, subtle insults, and spreading rumors about other students. Adults must recognize that laughter at another person's expense is a form of bullying and should be immediately addressed. Social exclusion and gossiping can lead to more direct forms of bullying. It is no longer acceptable to ignore on-going teasing and rumors as normal childhood behaviors. All forms of bullying should be recognized as a significant educational problem that must be addressed by all school professionals and parents.

Recognizing the signs of bullying is an important step in an effective anti-bullying program. Research shows that bullying can adversely affect a victim's mental health. Mary Wakefield from the Department of Health and Human Services suggests that bullying can leave lasting emotional consequences. Students who are bullied may demonstrate significant levels of anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and may experience physical ailments (Buhs & de Guzman, 2007). Children who are bullied may refuse to go to school and often have a severe dislike of going to school. Given the high rates of bullying on children with disabilities, it is critically important that special education professionals are keenly aware of the signs of bullying and the long term impact. Bullying and disability harassment can seriously interfere with the ability of students with disabilities "to receive the education critical to their advancement" (OCR, 2000).

Recognizing the legal requirements for school district personnel is also part of a comprehensive anti-bullying program. Bullying and disability harassment may result in violating state and federal laws. Parents and school personnel must recognize that educational institutions are held

legally accountable to provide an educational environment that ensures equal educational opportunities for all students (OCR, 2010). As will be discussed later in this article, the Office of Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Education have established legal requirements of educational institutions to provide an environment that allows students to benefit from a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) free of disability harassment.

*"School was hell wrapped in a hot winter fur. This one girl at school never wanted anything to do with me. All of my attempts to play with her resulted in rejection. As the school year progressed, my peers started to use my idiosyncrasies against me for their own fun."*

Rosemarie, *Girls Under the Umbrella of ASD*

In 2011, a NY federal judge ruled in a precedent setting case regarding bullying and harassment for students receiving special education services (*T.K. v New York Department of Education*, 2011). A 12 year old girl with autism and her parents had repeatedly complained to the principal of bullying in school. The school did not take adequate steps to investigate and prevent future bullying. The district court ruled in favor of the parents that their daughter was denied a Free and Appropriate Public Education based largely on the Office of Civil Rights Harassment and Bullying Guidance Letter (2010). Although the NY district court case can not be directly applied at a national level, the ruling demonstrates the strict duties of school personnel to take prompt and

appropriate action when bullying occurs to students with special needs.

## Respond

To formulate a viable response to the bullying epidemic, parents and professionals must develop a comprehensive anti-bullying plan which responds to the bully, bystanders, and victims of bullies. When responding to bullies, adults must first understand that there is no single profile of a "typical"

bully. The prototype of a young male bully who is rough, strong and aggressive is not supported by the research. According to Dr. Susan Swearer, an expert on bullying in schools, bullies can be almost anyone given the right environmental conditions (2010). Bullies can come from different cultures and can be seen as "regular" kids. Not only does bullying occur with a variety of children it occurs in all areas of the school campus and across settings. School personnel must be cognizant that bullying often occurs in unstructured school areas including playgrounds, hallways, cafeteria and the school bus. Bullying can also occur at other

educational sponsored events, such as field trips, school assemblies, and athletic events, where the school district is obligated to create a safe and bully free environment.

All school personnel must respond to bullies immediately and consistently. Ignoring even mild repeated teasing from a bully can quickly escalate to more direct physical bullying or assault. Dr. Swearer adds: "If left untreated, children who learn that bullying is an effective way to get what they want are likely to continue bullying behavior into adulthood. Thus, it is critical to intervene and stop bullying during the school age years." A quick response to bullying includes separating the bully and victim to insure the victim's safety. Tell the bully directly he has violated school

rules and report the incident to school administrators. Adult responses to bullies should be swift, direct, and send a clear message of zero tolerance.

Bystanders are those, such as peers and adults, who watch bullying happen and may feel powerless to stop the bully. Bystanders to bullying in schools are a key prevention technique for decreasing the intensity and duration of bullying. Recent research has found that educating bystanders to safely intervene on behalf of a victim can greatly decrease bullying towards children with disabilities. According to Dr. Michele Borba (2001), bystanders can be the “ultimate arbitrators” in bullying situations. Parents and school personnel should develop specific strategies for educating bystanders on disability awareness which creates acceptance for all students. The goal of peer education is to value diversity in schools. Because adults in schools may not always be available to supervise the educational setting, it is important to educate and empower bystanders to intervene and diffuse a bullying situation.

Responding directly to bullies and educating bystanders is part of a comprehensive anti-bullying program. Parents and school professionals must also directly respond to the victims of bullying. Students with ASD, who statistically are often victims of bullies, must be taught adaptive skills for addressing a bully. The school team, including the parents, should identify and then directly teach necessary educational skills to help the student prevent such incidents and when unavoidable, confront bullies successfully. These educational and interpersonal skills may be written into the student's individualized education program (IEP). The goals and benchmarks would include social skills, speech and language skills, and self-advocacy skills.

Students with ASD will require an

educational approach that is concrete and sends a positive message on addressing bullies. Dr. Michelle Borba (2001) has designed an anti-bullying

*“If you fit in, life is easy. If you don't, that's when all the teasing and bullying starts. For kids on the spectrum, it can be pure hell.”*

Temple Grandin, *Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships* (2005)

program with straightforward rules and simple steps that can easily be taught to students with ASD. The CALM approach describes plainly how a student should respond to a bully.

- **Cool down.** Teach students to recognize stress signals and learn calming strategies. Deep breathing and positive value statements can be practiced with the student.
- **Assert yourself.** Part of the social skills curriculum for students with ASD should include teaching assertive body language. Role playing and video modeling can assist in teaching non-verbal body language that can deflect and detour bullying attempts.
- **Look them in the eye.** Although eye contact can be difficult for some students with ASD, parents and school professionals should teach students how to face a bully and look them in the eye. Visual supports and a social story may be beneficial in teaching eye contact during a bullying attempt.
- **Mean it.** The speech and language therapist and school team should work directly with the victim of bullying on specific language scripts for responding to a bully. Students should learn a non-confrontational script such as “stop that,” “leave me alone,”

“you are being a bully,” or “get away from me now.”

In conjunction with the CALM approach, parents and the school team should teach self-advocacy skills as part of the IEP goals and benchmarks. Self-advocacy skills help students with ASD better understand their disability. Each step of the CALM approach can be taught discretely or with a combination of social and communication skills. Social narratives, role-playing, and direct instruction are effective educational methods for teaching a student with ASD how to respond to a bully. It is also important that parents and school professionals practice each step of the CALM program repeatedly and throughout the school age years as bullying can change from year to year.

## Report

It is not enough just to recognize and respond to bullying in schools. To eliminate bullying and create a safe learning environment, parents and professionals must systematically report bullying to school officials. According to the federal government run website [Stopbullying.gov](http://Stopbullying.gov), all school personnel including paraprofessionals, office assistants, transportation staff, coaches, and school monitors should be thoroughly trained in reporting and tracking all bullying experiences. Without quantitative bullying data, school districts will be ineffectual in designing interventions that are individualized and target the serious nature of the problem. According to Dr. Swearer (2010), school district personnel must document any observed bullying behaviors and report them to the district to generate more comprehensive data on bullying experiences school wide. Currently, there is only sporadic and intermittent reporting of bullying in schools. Parents can play an important role in insisting



that school district personnel adopt policies and procedures for reporting and tracking bullying school-wide.

Federal, state and school level officials must adopt reporting methods to adequately address bullying. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 45 states currently have passed laws that address bullying and disability harassment. Although the legal regulations surrounding bullying can be quite rigorous, state level educational agencies and local school districts have not consistently adopted systematic reporting school wide. A failure to report or thoroughly investigate bullying in schools can be illegal under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (OCR, 2010). School districts have repeatedly failed to recognize and report bullying activities and disability harassment which limits students' ability to benefit fully from their educational program. The Office of Civil Rights and judicial decisions have made it clear to school districts that they must implement a comprehensive approach that eliminates a hostile bullying environment. The approach must include disciplining the bullies, training staff, and monitoring that the bullying does not resume.

In the past, playground bullies and teasing has been minimized and accepted in schools as a rite of passage. But due to national media attention of severe and egregious bullying incidents taking place in schools, it has been moved to the forefront of educational forums and discussions. According to U. S.

Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan, "bullying is finally being recognized as a school safety issue." Parents and school personnel can effectively work together to address this serious issue by following the 3 R's: Recognize, Respond, and Report.

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